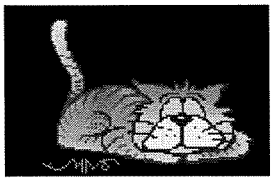
The Mammal Society

Look what the cat's brought in!

The Mammal Society has just completed a survey of the kinds and numbers of animals that are killed by domestic cats. Michael Woods has produced a summary of the results of the survey which ran for the 5 months up to August 31 1997.



We received the kill or capture records of 964 cats, amounting to more than 14,000 prey items. The mean number of catches or kills per cat over the five month period was 16.7 which gives an annual average per cat of 40 victims. Multiplying the pet industry's estimate of 7.5 million domestic cats by 40 suggests that the British cat population could be killing at least 300 million animals and birds every year. Of course this does not include the animals that cats killed and ate away from home nor the kills of the 800,000 feral cats believed to be living in Great Britain.

It is generally felt that there are more cats living in urban and suburban areas than rural ones so we used the presence of nearby arable fields to indicate whether the cat in question lived in a rural habitat. We discovered that 39% of our cats were living close to arable land (possibly country cats) while 61% were not. The mean kill rates for the two groups of cats were quite different. During the 5 month survey the country cats killed 18 items on average but the town cats managed only 12.5 items.

Kill rates tend to decline as cats get older and slower. Generally, the two year olds killed most, although some of the very biggest killers were the grizzled and really experienced 8 and 9 year olds. Of the 740 cats for which we have bell records, 232 were bell wearers (31%) and 508 were non-bell wearers (69%). The mean kill rates for bell-wearers was 19 and for no-bells 15. In other words cats wearing bells killed more! The number of birds that they killed was about the same but bell-wearers killed about 33% more mammals. Are they better hunters because they have to be more stealthy in order to keep their bells quiet?

If the cats in our survey are anything like average killers then the figures for amphibians and reptiles (herpetofauna) are quite alarming. Every year, cats might be getting through 4 million frogs, 180,000 toads, 170,000 newts, 370,000 lizards, 700,000 slow-worms and 80,000 grass-snakes. They are certainly putting pressure on reptiles which may have found that gardens are a haven away from inhospitable agricultural land. The cats who manged to catch 31 gold fish might be helping with the conservation of frogs as goldfish eat tadpoles and frogspawn!

3,383 birds were taken by cats in the survey. The 961 reported as "house sparrows" probably covers many small brown birds and the 503 recorded as unidentified species are likely to be more honest! Many of the birds noted appear to be chance kills - such as yellow wagtail, bullfinch, nuthatch, goldcrest, swift, red grouse, green and great spotted

woodpeckers, jay and budgerigar - and if we had sampled another thousand cats, we would probably have found another dozen species taken in ones and twos. Others, including 22 swallows, were taken by a very few cats, one of which, at least, had mastered the art of hooking these birds off a pond as they swooped low over water. I suspect that the 14 pheasants and probably the red grouse, were injured birds from shoots.

In all we have 13 bird species in which more than 30 individuals died - house sparrow at 961, blue tit 344, blackbird 316, starling 228, thrush (mistle and song because few cats owners differentiated) 145, robin 142, pigeon 114, wren 105, greenfinch 82, chaffinch 70, great tit 52, dunnock 34 and collared dove 33.

It seems that cats are not killing these particular species because they are particularly common but because they turn up in gardens. The Young Ornithologists Club carries out a bird table survey every winter to count the birds which come to bird tables and the top ten of these are among the thirteen birds most commonly killed by cats. Wrens and dunnocks are not in the top ten but both of those are mainly ground feeding birds which rarely come to bird tables. The thirteenth is the thrush which used to be among the top ten until its numbers fell because of agricultural practices and it dropped out. But for cats it is still number five on their kill list. So cats could be adding to the pressure being put on thrushes.

Among the mammals, our 7.5 million cats killed more mice (4196) than voles (1949) and shrews (946). This is probably because mice are more nocturnal than the other species and because they turn up more frequently in gardens. The cats killed only 162 rats which makes them very poor ratters and means that British cats could be killing just over 3 million rats a year. The recruitment rate for rats is about 326 million babies born every year so this is a drop in the ocean. They could also be killing an estimated 1.5 million harvest mice a year, taking into account their limited distribution, which, from a recruitment rate of only 11 million, is clearly much more serious. They kill about 15 million rabbits a year and this, from an estimated 281 million young rabbits born during the same period, is a very small percentage.

The cats in the survey also killed weasels, stoats, grey squirrels and 30 bats. The bat records could be very serious as bats are very slow to reproduce having an average of less than one young a year. British cats could be killing 230,000 bats a year.

Although it is unlikely that cats will cause any species to become endangered in Britain, for those which are already under pressure for other reasons, such as thrushes, harvest mice, grass snakes and slow worms, cats could become significant. Population crashes are sudden rather than gradual and here cats could make all the difference.

A problem with our analysis is that we don't know just how representative are the cats in our sample. We plan to extend our survey to address this problem and the results will be posted here later on.

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